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Future Visions: Queer Utopia in Steven Universe

Mandy Elizabeth Moore

University of Florida, mandymoore@ufl.edu

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Since it premiered on Cartoon Network in 2013, *Steven Universe* has garnered both praise and criticism for its portrayal of queer characters and its flexible approach to gender. Created by Rebecca Sugar, a bisexual and nonbinary artist, the show tells the story of Steven, a half-human, half-alien teenager raised by a trio of alien parental figures called the Crystal Gems. Steven's adventures range from helping his friends at the local donut shop to defending Earth from the colonizing forces of the Gem Homeworld. Across its five seasons, this series has celebrated many queer firsts for animated children's content. In 2018, *Steven Universe* aired one of the first cartoon same-sex wedding scenes ("Reunited"), and in 2019, it became the first animated show to win a Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) award, taking home the prize for Outstanding Kids and Family Programming. Scholars have noted the queer potentialities of this show, with Eli Dunn describing the series as a "queer cartoon carnivalesque space" that allows for trans and nonbinary representation (1), and André Vasques Vital arguing that the use of water by a Gem named Lapis Lazuli breaks down normative binaries. Furthermore, work on the queerness of animation from Jack Halberstam, Sean Griffin, and others points to how the very existence of *Steven Universe* as an animated children's show opens up space for queer interpretation.

However, as is always the case when children's media addresses queerness, the show has also faced opposition from those who believe that "queer" inherently means "adult" and that children should not be exposed to—"corrupted by"—anything outside of the heteronormative. Several countries have censored moments of queer intimacy, with the UK cutting certain shots during a dance scene between Pearl and Steven's mom, Rose Quartz, to make the scene more "comfortable" for viewers (Thurm). For every stride that Sugar and her team (often called the "Crewniverse") make towards LGBTQ inclusion, there is a homophobic parent or overly-cautious network executive pushing back, arguing that queerness has no place in the realm of the child.

Queer theorists and thinkers have also argued for distancing queerness from childhood—more specifically, from the ideal Child of the cultural imaginary. Notably, Lee Edelman asserts that all sides of the heteronormative political spectrum frame their ideologies in terms of building a future for the figural Child. The queer position, then, is to refuse this "cult"

of the Child and to reject the social teleology in which everything we do is “for the children” (3). Here, childhood becomes tangled up with ideas of futurity: if the Child represents the always deferred outcome of heterosexual reproduction, then, according to Edelman, queerness is a thing of the present, unconcerned with the “kid stuff” of the future. Even those queer theorists who are more optimistic about queer futurity still attempt to distance it from children and childhood. José Esteban Muñoz, for example, responds “to Edelman’s assertion that the future is the province of the child and therefore not for queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope” (11). The Child gets cut out of this formation completely in Muñoz’s argument, for he, too, is looking for “a future that is not kid stuff” (92).

Of course, there are also scholars who argue that queerness and childhood are indeed linked. For example, Kathryn Bond Stockton explores how children are held suspended in a state of delay—unable to be gay (or straight, for that matter) because sexuality is reserved for adults—and yet expected, regardless of sexuality, to be growing “up” towards straightness. Thus, “The child who by reigning cultural definitions can’t ‘grow up’ grows to the side of cultural ideals” (13). Scholars of children’s literature such as Michelle Ann Abate, Kenneth Kidd, and Roberta Seelinger Triles have also been attending to depictions of queer children and childhood in media for young people. However, as Kidd points out, much of this work involves applying queer theory *to* children’s media rather than *generating* a queer theory of children’s literature, leaving a rather large theoretical gap in which both queerness and children’s media could each inform our understandings of the other. In particular, if such theorizing is to respond to the claims of Edelman, Muñoz, and other queer theorists who disdain “kid stuff,” then we must not only theorize the connections between childhood/children’s literature and queerness but also the connections with *futurity*. If Muñoz is correct about the future being “queerness’s domain” (1), and if Stockton and Kidd are correct about the queerness of children and children’s media, then how might queer children or queer childhood contribute to a queer future, outside of the logics of heterosexual reproduction?

Building on these conversations as well as Marah Gubar’s work on the kinship model of childhood, I argue that *Steven Universe* offers a vision of a queer child who works alongside adults to create a queer future, engaging in the same kinds of imaginative utopia-making that

Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia*. I first demonstrate how the Crystal Gems learn to see Steven through a kinship lens; I then focus more specifically on his kinship with Garnet as they utilize two magical abilities, fusion and future vision, to highlight Steven as an example of the queer child who co-authors the future with adults. This show works well as a site for theorizing such a queer child because the series includes not only LGBTQ characters but also an active focus on building a better world in which love, acceptance, and playful fluidity are the norm—a kind of queer utopia. Although representations of LGBTQ characters in children’s media is certainly an important project, my argument is less interested in representation and more interested in theorizing a kind of queer activism which involves children. In this way, I respond to Kidd’s call to explore how children’s media might “unsettle what we claim to know about queer theory” (186) while simultaneously returning “kid stuff” to Muñoz’s conversation about queer futurity, not as something to disdain but as an important, fertile space for finding outposts of queer utopia. Using *Steven Universe* as an entry point, I aim to show how working *with* (instead of *for*) the children can help us to escape the stagnant, straight present and find a queerer future.

The queerer future imagined by *Steven Universe*, however, is not necessarily an intersectional vision of utopia. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, *Steven Universe* reifies racist and colonial ways of knowing, even as it challenges heteropatriarchy. As Christian Ravela points out in his review of the show, the series’ diversity “derives [meaning] from its opposition to, rather than its articulation within, a colonial order” (393). The show cannot address the intersectional particularities of colonized subjects’ struggles because it acts as if human cultures do not participate in colonization. Asian characters like Lars and Connie or African characters like the Ghanaian Pizza family, therefore, do not experience the kinds of colonial and neocolonial violence that real-life people with those ethnicities would.¹ Furthermore, as fan critics like Riley H. from *Medium* or Tehyah Carver from *Catapult* point out, racialized stereotypes in characters like Amethyst, Garnet, and Bismuth contribute to harmful societal beliefs about Black women being loud, abrasive, violent, and immune to pain. The show

¹ I further address this issue of *Steven Universe*’s failure to fully enact a decolonial praxis in a chapter of an edited collection forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan: “Off-Color, Off-Center: Decolonizing (in) *Steven Universe*” in *Representation in Steven Universe*, edited by Leah Richards and John R. Ziegler.

attempts to celebrate diversity but ultimately perpetuates dangerous narratives about colonization and people of color. These problems translate into a narrowly White, Western idea of queer utopia rather than the kind of expansive queer utopia envisioned by theorists like Muñoz, whose theory grows directly from the lives and art of queers of color. Although I here argue that *Steven Universe* works towards a kind of queer utopia and provides a generative space for theorizing how children can co-author a queerer future, I want to stress that without a truly intersectional framework, what *Steven Universe* accomplishes is not fully utopic and, furthermore, not fully queer.

Queer Kinship: Models of Childhood

Steven's family situation is, in many senses, a queer one. He is the son of Rose Quartz, a Gem who began a rebellion against her own people to protect the Earth from colonization, and Greg Universe, a wacky human musician. Normally, Gems do not reproduce in this way, so in order for Rose to have a son, she must give up her own physical form and life. Steven inherits her gem, the literal rock imbedded in his body in lieu of a belly button, which gives him access to his mother's special powers. Steven is raised by Rose's followers, the Crystal Gems, who continue to protect Earth from magical threats. These Gems—Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst—like all Gems, are technically agender aliens but use she/her pronouns (and are all voiced by female actresses). Thus, not only does Steven exist in the liminal space of being a human-Gem hybrid, he also belongs to a non-nuclear family with three non-biological mother figures.

Steven's relationship with Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst changes over time as their understanding of his childhood shifts, reflecting different models of relating to children. Marah Gubar explains that many Western conceptions of childhood fall into one of two models: the difference model or the deficit model. The Crystal Gems' initial response to Steven falls squarely into the difference model, which "stress[es] the radical alterity or otherness of children, representing them as a separate species, categorically different from adults" (Gubar 451). When Steven is first born, the Gems see him as literally a different species—a human baby. Their first gifts to Steven (a razor, adult diapers, and a dictionary) reveal their total lack of comprehension about what babies are ("Three Gems and a Baby"). Then, as Steven grows older and they learn

more about human children, the Crystal Gems transition to a deficit model in which they focus on what Steven lacks—namely, the skills to defend himself on missions. As Gubar asserts, this model defines children by the adult qualities they have yet to develop, positioning kids as not-yet-complete, and in some ways, not-yet-people. Gubar explains that while there certainly are things children must learn, the model is ultimately patronizing, ignoring children’s actual capabilities. During the early seasons of the show, the Gems treat Steven as a lesser member of the team. For example, in “Cheeseburger Backpack” (1x03) and “Serious Steven” (1x08), Steven is only provisionally allowed to accompany the Gems on missions because he cannot yet control his powers. Furthermore, the Gems initially treat Steven’s compassionate instincts as a childish lack on his part rather than his contribution to the team. Steven frequently tries to befriend unknown or villainous characters, from the monstrous centipeetle to Homeworld Gems like Lapis Lazuli and Peridot. His instinct is to be kind and diplomatic, relying on words to solve problems rather than jumping into battle. His ideas are not only valid solutions but often end up working better than the Gems’ ideas.

The narrative of the show consistently reminds viewers that Steven is not merely an undeveloped child but a valuable member of the team *as he is*. For example, in “The Test” (1x38), Steven tries to prove himself by completing a mission simulation but discovers that Gems have rigged the test so he cannot fail. He overhears the Gems discussing how they want to “give him another success” to boost his confidence, but in this conversation, they also reveal their own insecurities about their ability to parent Steven. Ultimately, it is the Crystal Gems who need a success to boost their confidence in parenting, a success Steven gives them by pretending to complete the test. The Gems’ conversation focuses on Steven’s deficits, but the narrative parallels between Steven’s and the Gems’ decisions in this episode highlight instead the ways in which Steven is already similar to his mentors. This episode thus illustrates a third model of childhood that Gubar proposes as an alternative to the problematic deficit and difference models: the kinship model. Kinship follows from the idea that adults and children “are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar,” emphasizing the humanity of children and placing them on a “messy and unpredictable continuum” with adults (Gubar 453-54). As demonstrated by “The Test,” Steven is not the unfinished version of Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl; instead, all four are

continuing to grow and learn together, helping each other from their various positions of age and experience. *Steven Universe* thus demonstrates the queer “growing sideways” that Stockton notes can happen at any age; “the width of a person’s experience or ideas” can always expand regardless of how old they are, challenging teleological narratives about growing up towards heterosexual completeness (11).

Eventually, the Gems move towards a kinship model of relating to Steven, finally understanding what the narrative has always shown to be true about Steven’s abilities. Although the Gems still train and protect Steven, they focus less on what he lacks and more on what he brings to the table, looking to him for solutions and inspiration. For example, season five sees the Crystal Gems face the Diamonds, rulers of Homeworld and colonial leaders of an intergalactic Gem empire. Steven decides to try and talk to the most powerful Diamond, White, using his diplomacy to change her villainous ways. The Crystal Gems know all too well that convincing the tyrannical White Diamond of anything is improbable, but instead of dismissing Steven’s plan, they immediately follow his lead. Although Steven faces more difficulty than expected, he eventually changes White’s mind, a success that would have been impossible under a difference or deficit model of childhood. Ultimately, the arc of the narrative depends on the Gems learning to see Steven through a lens of kinship, trusting his capability as a full member of the team.

Steven’s place in the Crystal Gems, as a team and as a family, is thus a kind of queer childhood. The kinship model rejects heteronormative constructions of the child, which often build on deficit and difference concepts. Edelman, Stockton, James Kincaid, and others have demonstrated how fantasies of childhood (as fundamentally different from adulthood) and fantasies of innocence (as the lack of experience that defines childhood) connect to broader cultural understandings of sexuality. For example, Stockton points out how the presumption that children are void of sexuality, even as they are presumed to be growing “up” towards straightness, is challenged by ghostly notions of a queer child. Thinking about how children can grow sideways disrupts the teleology of the deficit and difference models, hinting at alternatives to the “straight” movement from innocence to experience. A kinship model, which allows for a childhood *akin* to adulthood, similarly pushes back against these traditional paths of growing up.

Simply by seeing Steven as a person akin to themselves, as opposed to a not-adult or not-yet-adult, the Crystal Gems are already engaging in a kind of queer worldmaking.

Importantly, however, this queer worldmaking does not always challenge other axes of oppression, demonstrating the show's failure to fully imagine utopia. Although the Gems' victory over the Diamonds is queer both in its deployment of a kinship relation and in the way Steven bends gender roles through his heroic masculinity of diplomacy and empathy, the narrative does not confront the Diamonds' colonial violence. In fact, it is Steven's insistence on extending empathy towards the Diamonds that ultimately glosses over their colonial treachery. Although he does convince White Diamond not to violently impose her own "perfection" on other beings (in a kind of metaphor for the "civilizing" mission of colonialism), Steven does not ask her to dismantle her colonial empire or develop empathy for others. Instead, when she breaks down, overcome by the knowledge of her own imperfections, Steven reacts with compassion: "If you just let everyone be whoever they are, maybe you could let yourself be whoever you are, too," he says, inviting her to change in order to stop enacting violence on herself rather than because her actions have been violent towards others ("Change Your Mind"). Steven and the Gems may engage in queer kinship in order to battle colonial forces, but their victory does not imagine a fully decolonial kind of queer utopia.

Queer Intimacies: Utopia through Fusion

Beyond developing a kinship model which generally challenges heteronormative narratives, the show depicts Steven's relationship with Garnet in particular as a child/adult partnership of queer worldmaking. Garnet frequently invites Steven to join her as co-author of a queer future through two magical Gem abilities—fusion and future vision—which both demonstrate elements of queer futurity as outlined by Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz details a vision of futurity that is not tied to heterosexual reproduction or the deferred promise of future children; instead, this futurity both critiques the oppressions of the current system and imagines something different, something better. One way we can access such futurity, according to Muñoz, is by finding "outposts" of that future within the present: "Certain performances of queer citizenship contain... an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, ... a kernel of political

possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present” (49). Muñoz considers how public gatherings of queer people—from orgies to protests—challenge the ways that heteronormative culture tries to fragment and suppress queer realities, asserting those realities both as part of the present and as glimpses into the future. A particular moment of Garnet’s past operates in a similar way, as Garnet’s public display of queer intimacy challenges the Diamonds’ regime through the magical process of fusion.

Fusion occurs when two or more Gems dance together and combine their physical and mental forms, becoming a single, more powerful entity. In theory, the purpose of fusion is to create stronger Gems for battle, but within the show, it also operates as a metaphor for romance, sex, and intimacy. As Ravela explains, the concept of fusion builds on common anime tropes by “rais[ing] the sexual subtext of this trope into the text itself,” making explicit the sexuality of such fusion that shows like *Voltron* or *Power Rangers* only hint at (390). Under the Diamond Authority, however, fusion is stripped of its intimacy and queer potential, as Homeworld Gems are only permitted to fuse with other Gems of the same kind (rubies with other rubies, amethysts with other amethysts, etc.) and only for Diamond-sanctioned purposes. The Crystal Gems refuse these Homeworld rules, fusing with each other both for battle and for pleasure. At the end of the first season, the show reveals Garnet’s secret to Steven and the audience: Garnet is actually the long-term fusion of two Gems called Sapphire and Ruby, who are engaged in a romantic relationship with each other and whose fusion inspired the other Crystal Gems to attempt inter-Gem fusion, thereby catalyzing a different and queerer future.

In “The Answer” (2x22), Garnet tells Steven about her initial performance of queer intimacy that operates as an outpost of the future in the present. Five thousand years before Steven’s birth, during the height of his mother’s rebellion, an aristocratic prophet called Sapphire was sent to the Gem colony on Earth, accompanied by several ruby guards, one of whom bonds with Sapphire. Ruby breaks protocol to save Sapphire’s life during an attack, and as she pushes Sapphire out of the way, they accidentally fuse. The crowd is horrified, and Blue Diamond threatens to destroy Ruby for daring to fuse with a member of her court. Like the crackdowns on public and queer sex in New York City that Muñoz describes, the Diamond Authority is intent on keeping the Gem population fragmented into categories, preventing as much as possible the

contact between types of Gems as a method of control. Building on Samuel R. Delany's idea of "contact relations" that cross racial and class boundaries, Muñoz explains how heteronormative and capitalist policies attempt to keep everyone in their own little bubble; breaking those barriers, especially in public, becomes an outpost of queer futurity, illuminating the utopic impulse beneath such contact.

Sapphire and Ruby's moment of contact sparks a whole new future for them outside of the fragmentary hierarchies of Homeworld. As a rare Gem with no options for Diamond-sanctioned fusion, Sapphire has always been alone, while Ruby has only ever experienced fusion in the service of protecting the empire. Their fusion is not only a transformative personal experience but also a threat, both social and economic, to everything the Diamonds stand for. Furthermore, Garnet becomes a metaphor for both interracial and queer relationships, opening up space for other Gems as well as for the audience to imagine a future full of different kinds of relations between bodies and minds. Eli Dunn notes how cartoon magic allows the show to depict Garnet as "a manifesto for a kind of queer love, one that defies fixed gender and stable embodiment and which celebrates the desire of those that lie outside the gender binary." Sapphire and Ruby demonstrate a queer relationship between two femme-identified agender characters of different Gem races, creating an outpost in the present of a future where relationships can develop outside of hegemonic logics of desire—at least in theory. Fusion is not a perfectly utopic process; as (ex-)fans like Riley H. discuss, fusions between Garnet and Amethyst (who are coded as Black) and Pearl (who is coded as White or, in some cases, Asian) reenact racist power dynamics and stereotypes. Garnet and Amethyst together form Sugilite, who is portrayed as overly aggressive and out-of-control, but their fusions with Pearl appear more disciplined and refined. Fusion theoretically makes space for radical challenges to multiple forms of hegemony, but the show frequently fails to take advantage of that potential, instead relying on harmful tropes about bodies of color.

Garnet sees fusion as an opportunity for Steven to participate in building queer futurity in the present. The other Gems, particularly Pearl, are skeptical of Steven's ability to engage in fusion and believe it will take him years of practice—in other words, fusion is not "kid stuff." Garnet, however, believes in Steven's capability from the beginning, saying, "I think Steven can

do it” (“Alone Together”). Her use of the present tense—Steven *can* do it—contrasts with Pearl’s belief that Steven *will someday maybe* be able to do it. Faced with the unknown of whether or not Steven can fuse, Pearl here falls back on a deficit narrative of childhood that prioritizes who Steven could be in the future over his agency in the present, much like the narratives of the figural Child that Edelman discusses. Like a politician who promises that *someday the children will have a better world* but refuses to listen to children asking for policies in the present, Pearl is invested in a straight futurism of growing “up” that prioritizes but always defers the endgame. This line of thinking leads to the trap of dead, empty futurity; Pearl’s imagined future Steven, “grown-up” and complete, is totally disconnected from his actual “growing sideways” in the present. Garnet’s kinship perspective, however, prioritizes the actual child in the present rather than an imagined Child trapped in an empty future. Though it may seem backwards, Garnet’s insistence on the present tense here is what enables her to build a different kind of futurity, the full and living futurity that Muñoz describes, which emerges through the acts of queer individuals in the present. Without acknowledging Steven as a person alongside her in the present, Garnet cannot work with him to co-author a future.

When Steven accidentally fuses with his human best friend, Connie, forming a genderqueer fusion called Stevonnie, Garnet immediately recognizes that Stevonnie is also involved in challenging the same kinds of logics that she herself fights against. Although at this point in the series, neither Steven nor the audience knows about Garnet’s fusion status, in hindsight we can see the foreshadowing in this episode as Garnet accepts Stevonnie as a fellow trailblazer. Pearl wonders if the fusion is “inappropriate” and advises them to unfuse immediately, but Garnet is overjoyed, saying, “You are not two people, and you are not one person. You are an experience. Make sure you’re a good experience. Now go... have... fun!” (“Alone Together”). Even though Steven and Connie are children, Garnet accepts their fusion as akin to her own work of creating a queer future. Whereas Pearl jumps into protective mode, Garnet encourages Stevonnie to play and explore, to learn through experience and continue pushing boundaries. For Garnet, the queerly utopic potential of fusion is not “kid stuff” in the derogatory, silly sense, but instead a potential accessible to queer imaginations of all ages.

Queer Time: Utopia through Future Vision

Garnet and Steven also demonstrate their kinship relation of queer future-making through the use of literal “future vision,” which is one of Sapphire’s (and thus Garnet’s) magic gem abilities. Before Sapphire met Ruby, she existed under the Homeworld regime as a prophet for Blue Diamond. Her visions of the future were always fixed, unchanging—mired in the hierarchies and predictability of Homeworld’s system. Everything changed, however, when Ruby and Sapphire accidentally fused. Garnet tells Steven, “Sapphire had known every moment of her life. How it would happen, and when. But because of Ruby’s impulsive gesture, she suddenly jumped the track of fate, and everything from that instant on was wrong, and new” (“The Answer”). The introduction of queer desire and fusion into her life literally changes Sapphire/Garnet’s understanding of time. Garnet describes her own ability very differently than Sapphire’s: “I can see options and trajectories. Time is like a river that splits into creeks or pools into lakes or careens down waterfalls. I have the map, and I steer the ship” (“Future Vision”). No longer is the future about what will be, but rather what might become; no longer is it a realm dominated by a single story of oppression, but rather a realm in which many stories are possible. Now, Garnet’s understanding of the future is also queered—after all, fu[tur^e vi]sion reduces down to fusion. It is the queer love in her life which allows Garnet to imagine the future differently, seeing paths out of the stagnant colonial and heterosexual present in which both Ruby and Sapphire were trapped. This queered future illustrates Muñoz’s proposition that queerness allows us, “in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*” (1).

When Steven learns about Garnet’s ability, he first imagines the unknowns of the future as an attack. “Everything I do shoves me violently towards the end!” he shouts to Garnet (“Future Vision”). Steven sees time from the perspective of straight logic, which dictates a literally straight, linear progression of time in which helpless children are under attack from a dangerous future. However, Garnet explains that the future is not attacking him but rather giving him possibilities in which he has agency to make change. “There are millions of possibilities for the future,” she says, “but it’s up to you to choose which becomes reality... You choose your own future” (“Future Vision”). Garnet’s queered understanding of time allows her to see the

future not as dead space but as potential, the kind that children can participate in activating. Like Muñoz, the future is, for Garnet, “queerness’s domain” (1), a place where nothing is fixed and hope is possible.

Garnet solidifies this lesson for Steven in later episodes by briefly giving Steven her ability. The first time this happens, in “Winter Forecast” (1x42), Steven is able to see multiple outcomes of attempting to get his friend Connie home during a snowstorm. Rather than seeing the litany of possible disasters as an attack, this vision allows him to navigate the future by making better choices, ultimately getting Connie home safe and sound. Like Garnet, Steven’s understanding of time changes from a fixed progression into a free-flowing, open map in which choices have consequences. Rather than seeing Steven as unable to handle the complexities of future vision or incapable of making choices based on that vision, Garnet sees Steven as a co-navigator of the future and provides him with the knowledge and skills he needs to make his own decisions. She allows him to step into the role she normally occupies, operating in a kinship model of parenting by seeing Steven’s similarities to herself. Garnet chooses to build the future *with* Steven instead of making choices for him.

Garnet’s role as queer world-maker is not only enhanced by her kinship with Steven, it is in fact contingent on a kinship model. In “Pool Hopping” (5x15), Garnet reveals that she has been feeling lost when it comes to the future after Steven made a series of decisions she had not predicted at all. She eventually becomes so overwhelmed that she freezes: “I don’t know anything anymore!” she tells Steven. Garnet finally recognizes that the cause of her anxiety stems from a failure to see Steven through a fluid kinship model; sometimes even she has trouble moving away from a deficit model. She says, “I’ve been looking into probable futures where you act like a child. I keep expecting you to run from responsibility and to turn to me for help, but you don’t do that anymore... I just need to factor in that you’ve grown up.” Although Garnet frames this shift in terms of Steven growing “up” and no longer being a child, the fact is that Steven still *is* a child. Steven may have grown, but he is not a grown-up; instead, he is a *child* who does not run from responsibility. Garnet has to adjust her frame of reference to see Steven as a decision-maker rather than relying on her previous, static conceptions of his need for protection and guidance. Her own ability to imagine the future depends on imagining Steven not

as a figural Child but as a queer, agential child, co-author of the utopic world she attempts to build.

Conclusion: Bittersweet Utopia

Garnet and Steven's kinship relationship functions as a model for the kinds of everyday queer activism that adults and children can enact together. Although *Steven Universe* may convey this activism through magical processes which are inaccessible to us in reality, their story provides a starting place to imagine how children can be actively involved in queer world-making. Jane Ward's work illuminates one potential manifestation of such kinship activism within the home, showing how queer parents can include their children in the process of creating a queer family life. Ward advocates for a queer parenting style that "forge[s] a utopian space in which queer social experiments and adult/child camaraderie take the place of possessive investments in children" (233). This kind of parenting posits child-rearing as an experiment in which both the parents *and the child* play together in the sandboxes of gender and sexuality. Ward thus suggests one of many possible ways that quotidian queer activism can include "kid stuff."

Of course, the "kid stuff" of *Steven Universe* is far from perfect, and the show's failure to imagine a queer future that is also decolonial and anti-racist limits its usefulness in theorizing queer utopia. Steven's story can only provide a jumping-off point; while the series provides a useful future vision *toward* queer utopia, that vision still needs some radical adjustments in order to build a truly inclusive future. *Steven Universe* challenges narratives from both homophobes and queer thinkers who believe that childhood should have nothing to do with queerness and vice versa. Continued work in this conversation with more intersectional texts can extend that challenge, reminding us that queer decoloniality and queer anti-racism also have a place in childhood. Furthermore, rethinking queer activism by including children through a kinship model has the potential to reshape our ability to imagine queer futures. If children are involved in everyday experimentation and decision-making processes about how to best shape the future, then their perspectives and capabilities, like Steven's, can open up new avenues of imagination. This kinship model can also include conversations with children about what happens when texts

like *Steven Universe* fail to fully imagine utopia, thinking through intersectional utopia *with* children rather than merely *for* them. Relating to children in this way also helps adults to sidestep heteronormative narratives that rely on difference or deficit models of childhood to entrap us in a straight progression towards a dead, empty future. Ultimately, *Steven Universe* suggests not only that a politically useful sort of queer futurity *can* indeed be “kid stuff,” but that perhaps it *needs* to be “kid stuff” in order to build a better world.

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